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THE RUSSIAN VILLAGE AND THE WAR

By ROBERT E. BLAKE

PETROGRAD, RUSSIA

THE average Russian village is hardly an attractive spectacle. One emerges from the forest into long, alternate strips of rye, potatoes, flax and hemp; then on the low hill in front, gray cabins and barns appear. Partly ruined and dilapidated, partly fresh and sheathed with clapboards, the houses are scattered along the line of the rut-eaten road. Encircling the shanties runs a high six-rail fence.

This is an important feature of the village, for each "court" (peasant house with outbuildings) is obliged to maintain a given section of it. Within its limits the stock are allowed to wander at will until the crops are gathered, when they are turned into the fields.

In the northern districts the shortness of the season prevents much cultivation of vegetables. The individual peasant, aside from his inherent conservatism, fears his neighbor's children. "What is the use," he asks, "of planting carrots and beets, when they will be stolen before the roots are really set?" Further south, vegetable gardens become more common. The turnip alone, the most hardy of the esculents, is grown in quantities for human and animal consumption.

The inhabitants of the village are seldom picturesque. The costumes of the men—coat and trousers of cheap woolen stuff; occasionally also of home-woven linen of a dull blue color—has no specific character. The women are clad in cheap gingham gowns; only the bright bandanna handkerchiefs give a touch of color to the landscape. The hard life, coarse food and the demon vodka have bowed the figures and lined the faces.

For one who looks below the surface, however, and has some knowledge of the conditions of Russian life, the sayings and doings of this apparently uninteresting hamlet are of profound interest. Russia is an agricultural country, and it is such humble hands as these which raise the millions of tons of grain formerly poured into the mouths of hungry Europe. It is the strong arm and patient heroism of the Russian *muzhik* which form the impenetrable ring of blood and steel which dams the Teuton flood on the western border. For this reason it is not without interest to review those changes which the war has introduced into the life of this isolated settlement, which was previously almost untouched by the currents of the outside world.

Should we happen to visit the settlement at harvest-time, we should

be struck by the predominance of women over men among the field hands. A husky *baba* (peasant woman) is hooking the hay on to the cart: two more are trampling it down. In a neighboring strip of rye an old, bent woman is swiftly and scientifically binding sheaves of golden grain which fall before the sickles of her two half-grown grandsons. Further on two young peasant women are pulling flax, knocking the earth by a dextrous slap upon the brown instep, only pausing to cast a bright eye in the direction of the travellers as the "phaeton" gallops by. It is the broad-shouldered, wide-hipped Russian *baba*, whose husband and sons have left her to shed their blood for their country on the plains and in the swamps of Poland. Bowed already by household cares, she has taken upon herself the labors of her absent men, and her strong arms, equally at home in the field and in the house, now do the plowing, sowing and reaping as well as spinning, cooking and rocking the baby.

Of course, she works under a handicap. About 40 per cent. of the draft animals have been requisitioned for the needs of the army. This has had its effect in the reduction of the total area under cultivation, which probably averages about 15 per cent. in those districts of Russia which lie outside the immediate zone of hostilities. The peasant is better off in this regard than the landholder, for the communistic organization of the village enables the available resources of stock and of labor to be more evenly distributed over the territory under cultivation. The government has helped as well by the advance of seed-grain, and to a certain extent by placing the services of the prisoners of war at the disposal of the population.

One thing has improved the situation greatly. Vodka, the curse of the population of Russia, has disappeared. The green sign of the *kazyonka* (vodka-shop) has departed for ever. This does not mean that Russia has stopped drinking—shades of Bacchus, no! There is hardly a peasant's hut in North Russia which has not three or four hop-vines growing near by, and every peasant woman knows how to brew *braga* (home-made beer). The townspeople comfort the inner man with wonderful and awful mixtures, whose basic components are furniture polish, denatured spirit and eau de cologne. BUT (and it is a very large but) these compounds do not penetrate to the remoter villages, and even if the population does indulge in a keg of beer now and then, the crops are not turned into alcohol as was the case before the war. One illustration from the writer's personal experience will show the far-reaching consequences of the measure. In one miserable village in northeastern Russia the income from the vodka-shop had been 23,000 rubles (\$12,160) a year. There were 23 "courts" in the hamlet, which made the average outlay per group of families (married sons live with their parents) something over a thousand rubles a year. Granting that

the exigencies of war-time have increased the disbursements of the family to a very considerable degree both in living and in working expenses, yet one can easily understand why the bank-deposits of the small investors have increased at the staggering rate of five million rubles a month.

The cyclonic wave of refugees which swept over the eastern provinces in the late summer and fall of 1915 brought another serious problem before the Russian village. A satisfactory solution of the same was reached only by the united work of the government and of all classes of society.

The lack of ammunition had made it impossible for the Russian armies to withstand the German drive on Poland. Foot by foot, contesting stubbornly, the legions of the Tsar were forced back from the Carpathians to the Vistula, and the San, from the San to the Dvina and the Pripet. Realizing that for the enemy supplies were the essential thing, the Russian decided to remove the population from the districts which they evacuated. Houses, crops and untransportable household goods were systematically burned. The unhappy inhabitants of the western governments were despatched eastward, taking with them their stock and sometimes a few of the more valuable chattels, but in many cases having to abandon them *en route*. More often, alas, they were forced to flee, having only had time to destroy, but not to save. This tidal wave of unfortunates swamped the railroads and the larger towns for the better part of three months. Official figures give the sum as four millions, but this is unquestionably too low. When we count those who left before and make allowances for faulty registration, etc., eight millions will not be far from the truth. To properly conceive this staggering total is almost impossible for the human mind. The ghastly amount of suffering and hardship which it occasioned can only be grasped by those who themselves beheld the arrival of the refugee trains: only those who aided and assisted can know the hell through which these human beings had passed.

The overcrowding of the larger towns brought about an immediate rise in prices of food and lodgings, especially for the poorer classes. To reduce the resulting congestion, it was decided to quarter the surplus population on the villages of the eastern governments of the empire. The relatively speedy and well-arranged distributions of the refugees was carried out largely through the efforts of the two great public organizations, the alliance of the *zemstva* (the local non-municipal self-governing bodies, best to be compared to the county governments among American institutions) and the league of Russian municipalities. They have shouldered a large share of the burdens which the war has brought upon the country.

With the arrival of the refugees serious complications arose for the

Russian village. In the first place, the unfortunates received a pension from the government, which was sufficient to provide them with the bare necessities of life. Such being the case, they were by no means inclined to exert themselves in the fields. Secondly, the majority of them were women and children. The Russian *baba*, as we have described above, can work in the fields as well as a man. This is not the case with the inhabitants of Poland and Lithuania. If extra hands are needed there in the fields they are hired. The women occupy themselves at household tasks or peasant industries—weaving, embroidery and the like. Thus the intention of the government, which had aimed at utilizing immigrants to help out the situation, was baffled, and the expected benefits did not materialize. The arrival of the refugees, apart from the above, had one serious economic consequence, which was felt most oppressively by the peasants themselves. The payment of the subsidies by the government to the refugees brought a considerable amount of ready money into the outlying villages. This caused a sharp rise in prices on food, the burden of which fell upon the peasants. The result was a widespread dissatisfaction, and to the same the government was forced to devote its most serious attention.

When we take it all in all, it seems to the writer that the Russian village has withstood the test of war conditions remarkably well. Part of the credit for this is due, no doubt, to the communistic basis of the land ownership (the *mir*). This has enabled the peasants to distribute their burdens more equitably, and has maintained a higher productive level. This is the more remarkable, when we remember the low percentage of literacy which prevails in Russia. One hears very often that the Russian peasant knows but little about the war. This is to a certain extent correct, for news penetrates slowly to the outlying hamlets. He is vitally interested in the war, however; there is hardly a family throughout the empire which has not one or more of its members in the field. No matter how ignorant your peasant or your *baba* may be, the fate of their nearest and dearest is a matter of vital import, and such news as penetrates is assimilated and comprehended—though perhaps partially and incorrectly—by each recipient according to his or her mental development.

Should it then come about, as all true Russians believe and hope it shall, that the Germans will be defeated, the glory will not be the guerdon of the valiant peasant alone, who has dyed with his blood the treacherous swamps of Poland and the rugged passes of Armenia, but an equal share must likewise be given to his patient and hard-working wife and mother, who cultivated the fields and cared for the children behind the bulwark reared by their husbands and fathers.